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The Bookshelf: *At Home With Ivan*

G. Warren Nutter, a University of Virginia economist and specialist in Soviet affairs, now serves in the Department of Defense. In "The Strange World of Ivan Ivanov," he presents a brief, hardhitting survey of Soviet economic achievements. Basing his conclusions on Soviet official figures (indeed there are no others), Mr. Nutter shows that Stalin's boast of "overtaking and outstripping the United States economy" was the emptiest kind of chatter.

Take housing, for example, one of the principal items in the standard of living. Ivan Ivanov, as the author personifies the average Soviet citizen, is crammed into housing space of less than 70 square feet, which works out at 2.3 persons to a room. As Soviet officials belonging to favored classes are well above this average, the allotment of the worker or peasant is lower. Quality of housing is harder to measure than quantity, but the author can find much support in the reports of foreign travelers in Russia to make the following comment:

"Soviet apartments are not only overcrowded, but also badly built. One observer has remarked that the Soviets have discovered the art of constructing old buildings from scratch. Normally a building is scarcely erected before the walls develop gaping cracks, doorways sag, floors buckle, facades crumble and stairways lean. Paradoxically the sturdiest housing seems to be that built in pre-revolutionary days."

One of the most conspicuous Soviet failures has been in agriculture, and here the contrast in efficiency with the U.S. is breathtaking. Using a labor force more than nine times the size of America's, the Soviet Union, with some of the richest soil in the world, lags 20% or 30% behind the U.S. in output.

It is interesting to recall that when Lenin proclaimed as part of his "New Economic Policy" in 1921 freedom for the peasants from arbitrary requisitions and other restrictions of the earlier policy, there was an amazingly rapid recovery in food output, although at that time the government could furnish little in tractors and heavy farm machinery. Later, when the decision was taken to "liquidate" the kulaks, or more successful private farmers, and to force the remainder of the peasants into collective farms, a plentiful supply of tractors and harvester combines was supposed to assure the success of this shift from private to publicly controlled farming.

But, not for the only time, the Communist leaders overlooked the human element in the situation. The peasants continued to supply a high proportion of the needs of the towns from the small private plots and limited domestic livestock they were permitted to keep for themselves. However, the state-owned land in the collective farms languished from neglect and indifference, despite propaganda and various schemes of penalties. As matters stand today, there are about 100 acres of arable land for every tractor in the U.S., compared with 400 in the Soviet Union, and a considerable proportion of the Soviet tractors are out of working order at any given moment.

Mr. Nutter points out that the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution begins with the words "Congress shall make no law" and continues with an enumeration of basic civil rights that no legislation can annul. With the people protected in these rights against legislative excesses, the U.S. system, as the author emphasizes, rests on dispersion of power, which is viewed as the only way to preserve a free society. There is no record of any Soviet executive decision, however retroactive and inconsistent with the words of the Soviet Constitution, being successfully challenged as unconstitutional. Law, in the Soviet system, means whatever the holders of power at any given moment want it to mean.

Separation of church and state is one of the bedrock American principles. In the Soviet Union the government controls all religious groups through the State Council for Religious Affairs, "an arm of the secret police, its staff drawn from those ranks."

While one of the immediate results of the Russian Revolution in 1917 was increased social mobility affording new opportunities of advancement for people who belonged to the poorer classes, Mr. Nutter questions whether this proposition holds good for the Soviet Union today. He finds Soviet society highly stratified, with movement up the class ladder and access to the privileges reserved for the Soviet higher classes very difficult. He sums up the position of the Soviet average citizen as follows: "He lives in a slum and enjoys a standard of life only halfway up to the poverty line."

—WILLIAM HENRY CHAMBERLIN

The Strange World of Ivan Ivanov. By G. Warren Nutter. World. 144 pages. $5.